"Mom Got Her Ph.D. from Facebook: Mitigating Misinformation and Xenophobia During The COVID-19 Infodemic," by Alan Chen

A critical distinction between modern and historical pandemics is the method in which information and news spread. While the virus spreads, the world follows through electronic screens. A pandemic reaching such magnitude is unprecedented in the digital age. How does the public learn to self-quarantine? How do citizens learn of a novel disease spreading exponentially across the world?

Modern media spreads news faster than the pandemic itself, and misinformation is proven to accompany this news. The World Health Organization (WHO) director Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus asserted at the Munich Security Conference that the world is not just "fighting an epidemic; [it's] fighting an infodemic" (WHO).

Infodemics are classified by the rapid spread of misinformation through traditional media outlets and social media websites, which ultimately hinder the solution of a problem (Zarocostas 1). The coronavirus infodemic has brought about extensive racism towards the Asian community worldwide, leaving a gap in the public need for alternative options to quell fake news. The often-proposed method of merely "educating the public" about best practices to prevent contagion is not sufficient, and in cases, will even incite further hysteria amongst the already agitated. This fear of alien threats does not dissipate by advising the public to align with certain beliefs.

Because the delivery of healthcare information to the public is as significant to public health as the medicine and treatment of the disease itself, it is essential to establish shifted frameworks of combating media-fueled misinformation during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, ultimately helping to reduce discrimination towards Asian-Americans.

Educating the public through media is not feasible because media-consumers rarely choose to consider information that does not align with their perspectives and worldviews. This implies that people would continue to seek news consistent with their ideological beliefs, limiting the extent that "educating the public" could aid in decreasing discrimination (Cinelli et al. 2).

Natalia Molina, a professor in urban studies and public health at USC explains, "when there's a pandemic or any kind of health crisis, our existing ideas about race naturally shape how we process and frame the situation" (Vox). Additionally, Roger Chung, assistant professor of public health at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, asserts "people generally believe they have a predictive model that can identify high-risk disease carriers, the reality is that the virus does not discriminate based on parameters such as language, regional identity, and political position" (Chung 2). In other words, prejudices imbued within society would not dissipate under tense circumstances of a global pandemic.

Public health officials and researchers must modify their course of action from just educating the public on personal health guidelines, to educating the public on where to seek this health information. That is, a substantial proportion of education should aim to aid unsavvy digital media consumers to pursue more credible evidence. This does not imply the general public

should be reading high-level academic articles to provide them with safety information, but it does mean citizens should find credible internet media sources to trust during the pandemic.

The US Government and the Center for Disease Control has the capability to encourage, and even enforce such practices. While these agencies have released unbiased, accurate details of how citizens should proceed with safety precautions, they have not productively pushed this information such that the majority of US citizens have understood government guidelines regarding coronavirus.

Presently, there have been outcalls to "educate" the public to solve these issues potentially. Researchers urge containing fear through education and communication campaigns (Person et al. 2). However, researchers acknowledge that this education would most likely spread through televised news, live-streamed press conferences, and internet sites, which are proven to spread misinformation further. In this context, if the education is solely about about the spread of the virus, such initiatives would imply little more than the further aggravation of the general public, in turn negatively impacting discrimination against the Asian-American community.

Others have proposed restricting media output. However, restricting media, unfortunately, brings in the debate of maintaining free speech and press during the pandemic, which also requires a counteractive measure. Instead of enforcing filters on news outlets and social media websites, the media, as well as citizens, should be urged to reform the overall rhetoric utilized when discussing the pandemic situations. The World Health Association's Infodemic team is currently working with social media powerhouses, including "Facebook, Google, Tencent, Baidu, Twitter, TikTok . . . asking them to filter out false information and promote accurate information from sources like the WHO and CDC" (WHO). The WHO's tactics have proven effective; nonetheless, the reach is not universally expansive. To further address misinformation, it is plausible that these companies, as well as individuals with a broad reach, should promote more accurate rhetoric when discussing the virus, which currently is still an issue. Most notably, US President Donald Trump utilized the term "Chinese Virus" to refer to the SARS-CoV-2 virus in two press release conferences and several tweets (Steinmetz).

If the infodemic is to be stopped, it requires the reduction of ignorant narratives in the media first—but this isn't the only way news outlets and social media can help these efforts.

What governments and media should do during the COVID-19 Pandemic is educate the public on where to find credible and valid information. Educating the public on how to identify credible and valid information can alleviate near-apocalyptic fears in the US. This is the first step in combating misinformation. Moreover, through the standardization of teachings in COVID-19, such as ensuring certain rhetoric is used when referring to the virus, or carefully defining social-distancing guidelines, the US would be able to further address fake news during the crisis.

The world is at the crucible of change in misinformation; hence, it is crucial to kindle the flame of anti-hate attitudes during the COVID-19 pandemic to avoid permanently tarnishing the reputation of marginalized communities. Without further action to reduce misinformation during the pandemic, more and more people will act like they have received Ph.D.'s in epidemiology from social media.

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